



Historia Fidei Lux

Gathered Fragments

The Publication of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania

Vol. XVI, No. 1, Spring 2005



The Ministry of Father Denys Baron

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Leaders such as George Washington, Gen. Edward Braddock and Gen. John Forbes are remembered for how they shaped global history during the French and Indian War fought in southwestern Pennsylvania 250 years ago. But there's little mention of one man who accompanied the French troops and served at Fort Duquesne.

He was Father Denys Baron, a Catholic priest who blessed soldiers before they went into battle,

and blessed some of them again before they were buried.

His name won't be found in traditional texts, but he left a register of baptisms and interments that's preserved in the archives of the Supreme Court of Lower Canada for the District of Montreal. In 1885, it was translated and notated by the Rev. A.A. Lambing, of Pittsburgh, author of *A History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Pittsburg and Allegheny*.

Baron's presence is additionally recognized in two beautiful pieces of art.

One is a stained-glass window at the Church of St. Peter in Brownsville, Fayette County. The other is a painting (shown above) done by Charles Hargens in 1954 to mark the 200th anniversary of the priest's first Mass at Fort Duquesne. It now hangs in an office at the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh.

Charles Baron was born in France and on his ordination on Sept. 23, 1741, followed custom and took the name of Denys. He professed his vows with the Recollect Branch of the First Order of St. Francis, which Father John of

Guadeloupe founded in Spain in 1500. In 1615, French explorer and navigator Samuel de Champlain introduced the Recollets into New France where Baron eventually came to serve as a missionary.

The register begins at a fortress near French Creek, south of Erie, with an entry by Friar Gabriel Anheuser, a Recollect priest and chaplain of the detachment. On July 11, 1753, he notes administering Extreme Unction (last rites) to John Baptist Texier, and officiating at his burial on "the camp of Presqu' Isle."

On July 31, Friar Anheuser and Baron both signed as chaplains for another burial, then Anheuser wrote two more on his own. Beginning on Sept. 16, all the rest of the entries are signed by "Fr. Denys Baron, P.R., Chaplain."

On Oct. 29, he noted the death and burial of "Monsieur Peter Paul, Esquire, Sieur de Marin, Chevalier of the royal military order of St. Louis, Captain of Infantry and Commander-in-Chief of the army of the Beautiful River, aged sixty-three years."

Baron made his last entry at French Creek on March 11, 1754, for the burial of a 28-year-old Marine, William Thybeault. It was shortly thereafter that an expedition under Capt. Pierre de Contrecoeur headed south to the Ohio River, which the French called Belle Riviere (Beautiful River).

There, the British under Capt. William Trent were building Fort Prince George at the point of the three rivers, now Pittsburgh. The French drove them out, finished the construction and renamed it

Fort Duquesne, after Marquis de Duquesne, the governor general of New France.

Although it's not written in the register, diocesan history notes that on April 17, 1754, the day after their arrival, Baron celebrated the first Mass at the chapel they called the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Beautiful River.



Msgr. A.A. Lambing published the Register of Fort Duquesne 1754-1756. His 1885 edition included a transcription of the French original, with an English translation on facing pages. In 2004 the Pittsburgh diocese published a facsimile edition, with a foreword by Bishop Donald Wuerl.

It was the first Mass in that location, but not the first on the frontier. Church historians credit that to Father Joseph Pierre de Bonnacamp, a Jesuit who taught hydrology at the College of Quebec, and who in 1749 joined an expedition under Pierre Joseph Celeron de Blainville. Their mission was to take official possession of the Ohio Valley, and along the way, they buried symbolic

metal plates to emphasize their intentions.

According to the history of the Catholic Diocese of Greensburg, on July 1, 1754, Baron celebrated the first Mass near what's now Brownsville. Although he was not specifically named, several factors support that he was with the French expedition that was heading for vengeance against the British.

A month earlier, on the morning of May 28, an encounter in the woods of Fayette County (Jumonville) ignited the French and Indian War. There's still debate over what actually happened, but the outcome was that soldiers under British Lt. Col. George Washington fired on French marines and killed their commander, Ensign Coulon de Jumonville.

Soon after word got back to Fort Duquesne, Jumonville's half-brother, Ensign Louis Coulon de Villiers, organized a troop of marines and Indians and set off on the Monongahela River. Their destination was the Great Meadows, near present-day Uniontown, where the British had hastily built Fort Necessity.

Since chaplains traditionally accompanied the French military, it was likely that Baron was the priest with them, since no other priest signed the register. The dates also coincide: The Mass at Brownsville, which lies between Fort Duquesne and Fort Necessity, was held on July 1.

Two days later, the French attacked the British stockade and Washington was forced to surrender. In all likelihood, when the French paused on shore to worship on their journey, it was Baron who led them.

The following year, 1755, Capt. Daniel Hyacinth Mary Lienard de Beaujeu arrived to replace Contrecoeur. By summer, the war had escalated to such a point that the British under the command of Maj. Gen. Edward Braddock set out to seize Fort Duquesne.

On the morning of July 9, the French prepared for the attack not only as a military action, but they readied their spirits as well. At daybreak, Beaujeu, his officers and marines gathered at the chapel. Beaujeu knelt in confession before the gray-robed chaplain and removed his hat when he received Holy Communion.

According to some historical accounts, when Mass ended, Beaujeu stripped off his shirt, painted his chest, strapped on a metal shield of armor and marched out with his men and their Indian allies. Although the French were outnumbered by the British, Braddock suffered a terrible defeat and was mortally wounded. Beaujeu was struck in the head by a musket ball.

Baron wrote in his register: "In the year one thousand seven hundred and fifty-five, on the ninth of July, was killed in the battle fought with the English, and the same day above, Mr. Lienard Daniel, Esquire, Sieur de Beaujeu, Captain of Infantry, Commander of Fort Duquesne and of the army, who was aged about forty-five years, having been at confession and performed his devotions the same day. His remains were interred on the twelfth of the same month, in the cemetery at Fort Duquesne under the title of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin at the Beautiful River, and that with the custom-

ary ceremonies by us, Recollect priest, the undersigned chaplain of the King at the aforementioned fort."

There were more dead to bury from that battle, and as the months passed, Baron officiated at the burials of even more, some who died from diseases.

Among the deaths he recorded in 1756 were Teresa Norment, age 14; Coroco, an Ottawa Indian from the mission of Michilmackinac; the fort's master carpenter, Alexander Page, 26; and a Huron Indian from the mission of Detroit.

The registry also notes a number of baptisms, one on Sept. 18, 1755, of John Daniel Norment, the first white child born in Pittsburgh, and who died several days later.

Contrecoeur and a trader's wife were godparents for Mary Jane Vermet, 19 months old, whose father "was killed by the Shawnees while coming to join the Catholics of these parts." Another entry records the baptism of Denise Louisa, "of English parentage, age three days. The mother having been taken by the Loup (Mohegan) Indians and afterwards given up to M. Dumas commander at Fort Duquesne."

He also baptized Frances and Frances Mary, "of English parentage ... whose father and mother are unknown": Ellen Candon, whose Irish Catholic parents "were captured by the Shawnees in coming here to join the Catholics," and Mary Louisa St. Mary, on the same day she was born.

On Aug. 1, 1756, Baron baptized Catharine Smith, 18 months old, "during a dangerous sickness, the daughter of William Smith and Cecilia Bangarnoz."

Nine days later he baptized her 2-year-old sister, Barbara, and then buried Catharine on Aug. 14.

The baptisms were not just for the young, nor the Europeans. Baron wrote of Denise, a Loup Indian girl, age 12, "who so ardently desired holy baptism" and who died two days later. On Dec. 17, "John Baptist Christiguay, Great Chief (of the) Iriquois, aged ninety-five years, or thereabout, who being dangerously sick, earnestly desired Holy Baptism." Another convert, a 12-year-old Loup Indian, took the name Denys for baptism, and died two days later.

In December of 1756, Baron was transferred to Fort St. Frederic at Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, where he died on Nov. 6, 1758, just a few weeks before the French abandoned Fort Duquesne.

His registry was officially preserved in Montreal on March 10, 1858. A year later, parts were published by the Cramoisy Press of John Gilmary Shea, of Manhattan, who specialized in American Catholic history. In Father Lambing's translation, Shea noted in the preface that *The Pittsburgh Daily Gazette* published excerpts in July 1858, "presumably from the pen of Mr. Neville B. Craig."

Writing earlier this year in the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, Bishop Donald Wuerl called Baron's register "a physical reminder of that continuity that is the life of the church," and cited his first Mass as the "beginnings of an established Catholic Church in southwestern Pennsylvania."

This article is reprinted, with permission, from the Pittsburgh Tribune Review, Dec. 19, 2004.